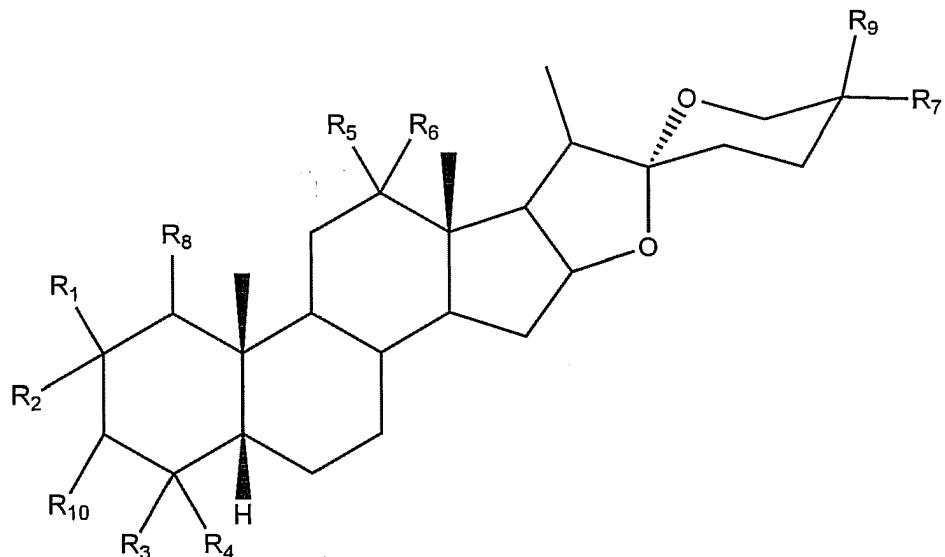


Amendments to the Claims:

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (currently amended) A method of stereospecifically preparing a 3β -hydroxy- 5β -H steroidal sapogenin of the formula



wherein R_1 , R_2 , R_3 , R_4 , R_5 , R_6 , R_7 , R_8 and R_9 are, independently of each other, H, C_{1-4} alkyl, OH, or OR (where $R = C_{6-12}$ aryl or C_{1-4} alkyl), or R_5 and R_6 together may represent a $=O$ (carbonyl) or protected carbonyl group, the stereochemistry at carbon centre 3 can be either R or S, and R_{10} represents β -OH, an β -O-linked sugar group or any β -organic ester group, which comprises reducing a 3-keto- 5β -H steroidal sapogenin using a reducing agent comprising a hindered organoborane.

2. (original) A method according to claim 1, wherein the reducing agent is a hindered organoborane reagent in which organic groups contain more than two carbon atoms and the sapogenin obtained is predominantly a 3 β -hydroxy, 5 β -H-sapogenin.
3. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein hindered organoborane is selected from lithium tri-sec-butylborohydride, potassium tri-sec- butylborohydride, sodium tri-sec-butylborohydride, lithium trisiamylborohydride, potassium trisiamylborohydride, potassium triphenylborohydride and lithium triphenylborohydride.
4. (previously presented) A method according to claim 3, wherein the hindered organoborane is lithium tri-sec-butylborohydride.
5. (cancelled)
6. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the molar ratio of the predominant sapogenin obtained to the alternative 3-epimer, is at least about 10:1.
7. (original) A method according to claim 6, wherein the ratio is at least about 15:1.
8. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, when performed in an organic solvent selected from tetrahydrofuran, toluene, *tert*-butyl methyl ether, diethoxymethane, 1,4-dioxan, 2-methyltetrahydrofuran and any mixture thereof.

9. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of tetrahydrofuran.
10. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of toluene.
11. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of 1,4-dioxan.
12. (previously presented) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of 2-methyltetrahydrofuran.
13. (cancelled)
14. (previously presented) A method according to claim 13, wherein the sapogenin is selected from sarsasapogenin, smilagenin, and esters thereof.
15. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the 3-keto, 5β -H steroidal sapogenin starting material is prepared by heterogeneous catalytic hydrogenation of a corresponding Δ^4 , 3-keto steroidal sapogenin to convert the Δ^4 , 3-keto steroidal sapogenin at least predominantly to the said 5β -H, 3-ketone.
16. (original) A method according to claim 15, wherein the heterogeneous catalytic hydrogenation is performed using hydrogen and a palladium catalyst in an organic solvent.

17. (original). A method according to claim 16, wherein the palladium catalyst is present on a support.
18. (previously presented) A method according to claim 15, wherein the Δ^4 , 3-keto steroid sapogenin is diosgenone.
19. (previously presented) A method according to claim 18, wherein the diosgenone is obtained by oxidation of diosgenin.
20. (cancel)
21. (cancel)
22. (cancel)
23. (original) A method for the synthesis of smilagenin, comprising catalytic hydrogenation of diosgenone followed by reduction of the resulting 3-keto, 5β -H steroid sapogenin using a hindered organoborane.
24. (withdrawn) A method for the synthesis of epismilagenin, comprising catalytic hydrogenation of diosgenone followed by reduction of the resulting 3-keto, 5β -H steroid sapogenin using an organo-aluminohydride.
25. (cancel)
26. (previously presented) A method according to claim 2, wherein the hindered organoborane is an alkali metal tri-alkyl or tri-aryl borohydride reducing agent.

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27. (cancel)

28. (cancel)

29. (cancel)

30. (cancel)
31. (cancel)
32. (currently amended) A method according to any one of claims 22 to 25 23, wherein the 3-keto-5 β -H steroidal sapogenin is prepared by heterogeneous catalytic hydrogenation of a corresponding Δ^4 , 3-keto steroidal sapogenin to convert the Δ^4 , 3-keto steroidal sapogenin at least predominantly to the said 5 β -H, 3-ketone.
33. (original) A method according to claim 32, wherein the Δ^4 , 3-keto steroidal sapogenin is diosgenone, which is obtained by oxidation of diosgenin.
34. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein a sapogenin initially formed is subsequently converted to a pro-drug form thereof or to another physiologically acceptable form thereof.3
35. (new) A method according to Claim 1, wherein the β -OH of R₁₀ in the sapogenin initially formed is converted to a β -O-linked sugar group.
36. (new) A method according to Claim 1, wherein the β -OH of R₁₀ is the sapogenin initially formed and subsequently converted to an β -organic ester group.